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“Political Settlements” for “Increased Resilience”: The Changing International Discourse on Peace Processes

Jan Pospisil

At the latest since the publications of the UN Secretary-General on “Strengthening the role of mediation” (UNSG 2012) and the recent OECD guidelines “Improving International Support to Peace Processes: The Missing Peace”, published by the International Network on Conflict and Fragility, INCAF (OECD 2012a), the issues of peace processes and peace agreements have once again returned prominently to the international agenda. These recent documents not only propose new and different avenues and approaches to analysing, accompanying and mediating peace negotiations. Moreover, they highlight the concept of “political settlements” in processes of peace negotiation. Thus, these documents are (re-)connecting the debate on peace-building with the concepts of state fragility and resilience, and the respective components of the so-called “New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States”, which was agreed upon at the High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness, held in Busan, South Korea in November 2011.

In the following, the process that led to these recent documents will be explored by considering three questions: firstly, what is the history of this new emphasis on peace processes, institutionally as well as concerning the narrative which has accompanied this new focus? Where does it come from, and for what reasons did it re-emerge? Secondly, which new components, dimensions and approaches, as different from the established ideas about peace negotiations and peace processes, can be identified in the discussions on “political settlements”? And finally, what are the implications on the ground? Is there already a change in the international involvement in peace processes, and whether this is the case or not, what can be expected in the near future?

The following sections will offer an initial, if brief and fragmentary answer to each of these questions. In the conclusion, a rendering of particular policy

Jan Pospisil

trends in the wider context of the transformation of international power constellations will be suggested.

The renewed emphasis on peacebuilding

While most of the scholars and practitioners involved in the work on or in fragile situations would agree that “statebuilding” and “peacebuilding” are the most important tasks to be faced in such efforts, they almost certainly would disagree on what both terms exactly mean, either conceptually or in terms of which concrete methods and measures they should be translated into. This seems rather reasonable: as broad, encompassing and overlapping as both of these terms are, they represent different approaches for local as well as international actors (Paris/Sisk 2009: 14). Both approaches are linked with different academic and policy communities and have different historic traditions.

“Peacebuilding” was the predominant way to deal with violent conflicts in the period between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s. The term is closely interlinked with the concept of “conflict prevention”. The 2001 OECD DAC paper named “Helping Prevent Violent Conflict” (OECD 2001) marks the climax of this period. Most of the contemporary approaches developed in response to the then emerging field of the development-security-nexus are to be found within this document, of which a whole chapter is designated to the issue of “peace processes, justice and reconciliation” (ibid: 51-60). In contrast, issues regarding “statebuilding” are merely of minor relevance: the main reference to statehood is in the chapter on “partnerships for peace”, where issues of weak governance are highlighted (ibid: 61-62). The all-encompassing phrases of “state failure” (only to be found in quotations) and “state fragility” (not present at all in the document) are merely of minor significance.

This relation between “peacebuilding” and “statebuilding” was turned upside down in the following years. “Failed states” (and statebuilding as the appropriate answer to it) were on the rise from the early 2000s onwards (cf. Paris 2004), and made their way into most of the relevant security doctrines of the

time (cf. The White House 2002, which included the famous quote that “America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones”, or EU 2003). At present, statebuilding still represents the main concept of international intervention in what is now called “fragile situations”, and is accompanied by a wide variety of international policy documents such as the “Fragile States Principles” by the OECD DAC (2007).

Such a domination of statehood-focused thinking increasingly led to doubts and scepticism, particularly from the peacebuilding policy community. Thus, departing from the insight that “the relationship between peacebuilding and statebuilding is complicated, contingent and context-dependent” (Call 2008: 3), various initiatives were launched to re-link both approaches. Perhaps the most important of those initiatives is the “International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding” (IDPS), established in 2008 and located at the OECD DAC. The IDPS was created as a forum of exchange between the OECD countries, civil society organizations and the so-called “fragile states” themselves (the latter mainly represented by the so-called g7+ group), with the aim of discussing the experiences and good practices, but also the difficulties and constraints of peace- and statebuilding activities. One of the main topics that evolved in these discussions was not surprisingly the issue of the linkage between state- and peacebuilding.

One of the main achievements of the IDPS to date is the so-called “Monrovia Roadmap on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding” from July 2011, which laid the foundation for all the fragility and peacebuilding debates at the 2011 High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan. The Monrovia Roadmap is the first official policy document that links the discourse on state fragility and resilience with peacebuilding. It does so by putting the emphasis on issues like state-society relations and political legitimacy (OECD 2011). Thus, the “growing convergence” between these two fields, which has been increasingly highlighted as being indispensable (Haider 2010: 5, cf. also World Bank 2011: 85), was introduced to the official, bilateral development discourse.

This would not have been possible without the dynamics unleashed by the g7+ group. The g7+ was established mainly as a result of the efforts made by Emilia Pires, the Minister of Finance of Timor Leste. The group currently has 19 member states, all perceived as highly fragile (and representing regional

contexts as diverse as Afghanistan and the Solomon Islands). The g7+ had its inaugural meeting in the course of an IDPS meeting in Dili, Timor Leste, and has been one of the main actors within the IDPS ever since. Consequently, the g7+ has been able to get involved in key aid policy debates such as in the G20 and the High Level Forum in Busan in November 2011. In Busan, the group emerged as the key stakeholder in the development and presentation of a “New Deal for International Engagement in Fragile States” (IDPS 2011), which endorses the approaches of the Monrovia Roadmap at the international level.

While this New Deal does not contain anything significantly new compared to the Monrovia Roadmap or other documents published by the IDPS, it still represents a major step forward. For the first time, peacebuilding and statebuilding are not only accepted as the most important challenges in situations of violent conflict and fragility, but it is also recognized that both approaches have to be actively brought together (in particular via the so called “Peacebuilding and Statebuilding Goals”, or PSGs, which are yet to be agreed upon). The second important contribution of the New Deal is that for the first time in formal OECD documents the development partners are playing on an equal playing field with the donor countries. This is of course due to a reciprocal interest at the diplomatic level: donors are aiming to create additional ownership on their side, while g7+ members are interested in constructing the image of a reliable and acceptable partner. Nevertheless, this marks a shift within the power distribution in the international development and security discourse.

Additionally, the New Deal was the main political cause for a change in the discourse at the policy level, in particular in the discussions about peacebuilding within the framework of the International Network on Conflict and Fragility (INCAF) at the OECD DAC. Since the mid-2000s, the debate at INCAF focused on “state fragility”, its reasons and possible methods for potentially fruitful intervention. Moreover, connected with the g7+ engagement, the peacebuilding topic is re-emerging, taking up several of the points raised in the fragility-debate (in particular the emphasis on state-society relations and “resilience”), and is framing all this in the term “peace settlements”.

“Political Settlements” for “Increased Resilience”

Although these developments are highly significant in the peacebuilding debate, it has to be taken into account that this process has been mainly on the bilateral (and also on the civil society) level. Discussions on the multilateral level have taken a somewhat different route. This is particularly true for the United Nations. For the UN, state failure has never been a particularly important topic, at least in explicit terms, most probably due to the sovereignty paradigm on which the whole UN system is based. Therefore, peacebuilding and peace mediation have remained far higher on the agenda compared with the bilateral sphere.

Settlements instead of treaties: changing patterns in the international debate

Along with such dissimilarity between the bilateral and the multilateral levels, the focus and the main issues of the respective debates also differ. The debate within the UN primarily focuses on mediation. This is of course closely connected with the installation of the UN Mediation Support Unit in 2006, and the necessary guidance that this Unit has needed since. Still, the UN has recognized significant changes in the sphere of peacebuilding, such as the fact that the “field of mediation has become more diverse and crowded” (UNSG 2012: 6). Furthermore, the international community is requested to act more patiently and discreetly, and is urged not to declare “the failure of mediation efforts when immediate results are not delivered” (UNSG 2012: 5-6).

The current OECD discourse follows a similar path. The basic assumption that foreign intervention – be it by diplomatic pressure, military means, or through developmental support – could actively create or even “make” peace has been finally dismissed. Instead, the focus is on political settlements, the question of “ripeness” (regarded as a necessary precondition for the ownership of the conflicting parties) and state-society relations. These terms are closely linked to the debate on state fragility and resilience at the INCAF. Such similarity might be caused by the fact that the main papers informing the debates have been elaborated by the same LSE scholars, primarily James Putzel and Jonathan Di John, who have also been responsible for designing

the fragility-resilience discourse in the context of statebuilding (cf. OECD 2011c: 21-22).

Di John and Putzel (2009) in particular argue for utilizing Political Economy Analysis in analyzing political settlements, focusing on elite bargains, rights and entitlements and the specific historic context in which these processes are taking place. Hence, their suggestions very much resemble other recent approaches to peripheral political spheres, such as the political marketplace approach of Alex De Waal (2009a, 2009b), and dynamic, society-centred approaches as Joel Migdal's (2001) "state-in-society approach" or the concept of "negotiated statehood" (Hagmann/Péclard 2010). Accordingly, it is obvious that the question of the structure of such political settlements takes centre stage in the actual implementation as well.

The OECD policy papers therefore argue for a "changing toolkit" of international engagement in peace processes (OECD 2012: 42), with the main emphasis not put on fulfilling an agreement point for point, but on keeping violence out of the post-agreement process and to guarantee the continuation of the transformation of the conflict and, consequently, peacebuilding. Since political settlements per se are based on certain power struggles, it is necessary for all involved actors to accept the post-agreement struggles, see them as necessary and, in most of the cases, as given. However, the focus should be to ensure that these struggles remain peaceful.

Besides focusing on the long term arrangements that will be negotiated after an agreement is in place, it is furthermore necessary to avoid falling into the trap of technocracy: "Peace agreements should place more emphasis on breaking the structures for violence than conventional Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration, Security System Reform and small arms reduction efforts" (OECD 2012: 21). Of course, all these steps have their legitimate place in post-conflict peacebuilding; nevertheless they are neither a litmus test (at least not in most cases) nor magic bullets. DDR or SSR processes enforced with neither the consent nor the ownership of all the involved parties – just because they are agreed upon in a peace deal – will most likely not help create a resilient settlement, but rather undermine any serious developments in that direction.

“Political Settlements” for “Increased Resilience”

The departure from the focus on signed agreements and the paradigm of stronger state institutionalization in its aftermath marks an important step, which has already been undertaken in the statebuilding debate. In this context, the two antipodes of “fragility” and “resilience” are understood as a particular kind of capacity (or lack thereof) in dealing with internal and external pressures: “More resilient states (...) are capable of absorbing shocks and transforming and channelling radical change or challenges while maintaining political stability and preventing violence” (OECD 2011c: 21).

Bringing these general assumptions to the peacebuilding level entails various consequences that go beyond a simple change in the “toolkit”. It not only requires strategic thinking and acting in the sense of what has been coined a “whole-of-transformation” approach to peacebuilding (Dudouet et al. 2012: 262), which aims to bring all relevant actors and structures together. It furthermore requires a new level of participation deliberation, up to the point at which the traditional label of “spoilers” – designating those who explicitly aim to spoil a peace process – will lose any kind of meaning, since “spoilers” in the context of a political settlement are none other than those left out, intentionally or unintentionally, hence making the settlement almost by definition neither inclusive nor resilient.

Implications for current processes

Given that we are dealing with very recent developments on the policy level, it comes as no surprise that empirical research on the practical implications of the new peacebuilding discourse “on the ground” is as yet non-existent. The OECD (2012: 73-84) of course points to the fact that some of the most active donors in this particular field take the new approach seriously; additionally, it has identified their respective omissions. Still, it is safe to say that the implications of the changing approach remain to be seen.

Nevertheless, there are remarkable trends that demonstrate the relevance of the main arguments put forward in the course of the debate. For instance, the current peace process between the Colombian government and the left-wing FARC guerrilla is rather prototypical for such a new agenda. Both parties

Jan Pospisil

have acknowledged in explicit terms the ripeness of the state of conflict for a new negotiation process, and they have set their agenda and designed the whole negotiation framework with minimal international involvement. Even though international locations are used for the negotiations (Oslo and Havana) and four countries are involved as guarantors and observers (besides Norway and Cuba Venezuela and Chile), there are no international mediators, no international pressure, and, most importantly, no international road-maps, concepts or the like.

Other negotiation processes like the ones concerning Sudan/South Sudan and Mali indeed demonstrate a higher level of international engagement, but – from a historical perspective – a comparatively high level of ownership and, above all, a regional leadership of the mediation process. The success is mixed, but the trend is obvious and accepted by most actors. Nevertheless, the current situation in Syria apparently demonstrates the exact opposite and exemplifies the old method of trying to force peace through diplomatic means, international, UN-led mediation and, if half-heartedly, military threats. While, of course, this is not the reason for the continuous failure of pacifying the Syrian conflict (which most probably might have more to do with the particular, obviously misbalanced political setting and the lacking ripeness for a transformation of the conflict), it demonstrates rather clearly the inefficacy of such a traditionalist peacebuilding approach.

The case of Syria demonstrates that it will be a massive task to implement the guiding principles of the new peacebuilding approach. Besides the usual complications every policy concept has to face on the long road to its application, this is caused by the, however implicit, challenge these approaches represent to concepts such as democratic peace or the ideal of a global law and justice regime, in particular regarding international criminal law. As has been shown, the concept of political settlements rests very much on processes of political accommodation (cf. Migdal 2001: 58-94), and such processes rarely correlate to the visions, agendas or at times even the minimum standards of most of the international actors. Approaches such as “Good Enough Governance” (Grindle 2004) try to take up this challenge and to translate it into a language acceptable to the international community, but still remain

“Political Settlements” for “Increased Resilience”

within a discourse that is very much based upon notions of statehood as relevant for the OECD world.

This opens up the more general question as to what international intervention and support is able to accomplish in peacebuilding, and, consequently, what it could or should do. The trend of the international debate regarding peacebuilding, but also regarding statebuilding, reveals that the times of excessive optimism seem to be over. Instead, the regional and local levels in peacebuilding are gaining significantly in importance, while the role of the traditional international players in peacebuilding is tending to return to acting as guarantors of regionally or locally negotiated and implemented solutions. Such solutions have the potential to become a huge and complex challenge, particularly in situations where they do not fit into the internationally accepted perception of common sense.

Conclusions

Despite the lack of its implementation in currently ongoing peace processes, the current peacebuilding debate, which has brought the issue of peace processes back to the international spotlight, must be assessed positively. Significantly, the debate restricts, at least in theory, the proliferation of external mediation actors, a process about which even the UN was highly sceptical. In turn, the problem of context is brought to the fore, feasible (“good enough”) solutions are explicitly preferred to idealized ones, and, in any case an essential step, the limitations of the possibilities of external actors in the context of peace processes are acknowledged.

This shift in the approach to peace processes is the policy outcome of an academic debate that has its roots in the mid-1990s. The re-packaging of the versatile and contiguous concepts and notions about the causes of violent conflict after the end of the Cold War – the “New Wars”, ethnic or ethno-political conflicts, the question of greed versus grievance, and the “Failed States” – in the concept of “Fragility” demonstrates a new international understanding of violent conflict and thus opens up a highly innovative range of solutions. Consequently, the focus of implementation is now shifting from

Jan Pospisil

the level of peace agreements to the much more general level of political settlements.

In more general terms, this shift also implies a new role for society and the conflicting parties. This finds its expression not only in the emphasis on “context”, but also in the usage of the – admittedly problematic – term “ripeness”. On the other hand, the role of international actors, including the leading global powers, is necessarily limited. However, their potential (as it is expressed for example in the idea of sanctions regimes) is probably historically overrated anyway. It is perhaps the most important achievement of the current debate to explicitly admit these limitations.

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“Political Settlements” for “Increased Resilience”

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